

January 28, 2005

To: CEQA Improvement Advisory Group

In the fields of conservation and development, one of the most crucial tools for encouraging the best uses of our land resources is the California Environmental Quality Act, CEQA. The basic goal of CEQA, to protect natural resources and maintain a quality environment, has been broadly supported since it was signed into law by Governor Ronald Reagan in 1970.

Governor Schwarzenegger has asked that we identify ways to encourage more efficient land use for new housing and infrastructure, while minimizing project impact on sensitive habitat and productive farmland. He has asked me, in consultation with a Cabinet working group (comprised of the Secretaries of Department of Food and Agriculture, Cal EPA, Business, Transportation and Housing, Labor, State and Consumer Services, and the Governor's Office of Planning and Research), to carry out a broad review of CEQA. Consistent with our unwavering commitment to a quality environment, our goal will be to determine how the statute can be improved so we may more effectively meet our conservation goals and development needs.

Decisions at all levels of government and those made by a wide variety of land use and development groups often overlap and are sometimes contradictory. Because CEQA review is required of all projects with potentially significant environmental impact, the statute and its application often carry the burden of unforeseen consequences and contentious dynamics.

Over the years, California has undergone significant landscape changes: rapid population growth, intense urbanization, suburbanization and urban abandonment. The loss of prime farmland and critical habitat is juxtaposed with evolving transportation requirements and escalating housing needs. The pursuit of a "quality environment," amid this complexity, tests the limits of our innovation.

Therefore, we are establishing a CEQA Improvement Advisory Group and I'm writing to ask for your help. We would like you to participate in helping us to improve CEQA by serving on this advisory panel. Our first meeting will be February 23rd at the Resources Agency in Sacramento in Room 1131 from 9 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. In order to make the most productive use of our time together, we invite your written response (no more than two pages, please) to the following question: What improvements could be made to CEQA to encourage efficient land-use patterns in the development of housing and infrastructure while protecting valuable habitat and productive farmland? Your response will form the initial basis for further discussions.

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In consultation with the Governor and the Cabinet working group, I'm asking a diverse set of people to serve, (no surrogates) as members of this advisory group. However, I'm also interested in the extensive network of organizations and individuals reached by those selected to serve.

I will not ask the members to make decisions, nor to come to a consensus. Rather this process will be driven by a convergence of opinion across diverse sectors and interests. Clearly, this convergence will be of importance to the Governor, and ultimately to the Legislature for policy improvements that require legislative action.

I am also pleased to tell you that the Public Policy Institute of California, the Keston Institute for Infrastructure at USC and the California Center for Regional Leadership have all agreed to provide assistance. The Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) will provide an overview of CEQA reform efforts and frame the major issues identified by these studies. The Keston Institute, with state and national expertise, will help us gather information and analyses to inform our discussions over the course of the next few months. CCRL will assist us in facilitating the advisory group process, and in taking the CEQA improvement conversation out into the regions of California. These groups will help to ensure that we get the broadest input possible on the nature of the challenges we face. From the full diversity of California's "places," will come ways in which changes in state policy can help to meet those challenges. There will be more about our partners' contributions during the first meeting.

Please help us with this important task by serving on the advisory group. We will schedule our meetings to be consistent where possible with members' availability. Please let me know of your decision no later than February 4th, so that we can plan the first meeting accordingly. Also, we would appreciate receiving your response to the question set forth above no later than February 16th.

With sincere appreciation,

Mike Chrisman
Secretary for Resources